

The Mother of the Island.

By KATHERINE HOLLAND BROWN.



"Me, I Hear Her Cry, and I Come Quick."

"An' I Stand Close so She Not Think to Look Behind."

SHEER from the ice-mailed lake below rose the Island, a white cliffe of solitude, towering, snow-piled, mounting steep on steep. No breath of wind stirred the laden ivory forest; no lisp of surf nor murmur of pines broke that enchanted peace. And yet, as we climbed the last wide, gleaming edge, beyond the old Fort hill, there lilted up through the crystalline air a fleeting call of melody. A woman's voice, from the tiny, red-roofed cabin nestled below the cliff, singing, in hushed content, a soft, slow lullaby. Through the quaint, halting rhyme there echoed a plaintive Celtic pathos; yet past it thrilled the higher, truer harmony of its mother-joy.

I leaned at the brink to hear. And as the song loitered on, unknowingly I twisted the tender alien words into our harsher speech:

"Rest, little Son of my heart!
Rest little Love of my day!
Quiet, my wood-pigeon, shut thy eyes;
Hush, my willful one, still thy cries.
Ah, little Son, thou must sleep, must sleep!
Ah, little Son, do not stay!

"Dream, little Joy, on my breast.
Dream, little Prince, of thy play.
Loud are the voices that summon and cry,
Soon comes the flight for thy eagle-heart nigh;
Then, little Son, thou must wake, must wake!
Dream, little Son, whilst thou may."

"That song our Marcelite has made, for love of Prosper, her one child,"

said Octave, peering down at the cabin, half-buried in gleaming snow. "Twonnet, there, sings it as she heard her mother sing it, at her own cradle in years long ago. To all our women is it *chanson* beloved. You, too, would love it, Madame—had you 'ut known our Marcelite."

"Marcelite?"

Octave's leathern face creased into quizzing wrinkles.

"You who know the island as by the heart, Madame? Yet have not heard of her, our Marcelite? But no wonder. For eighteen years it is, this day of Christmas, since the miracle; and even I, who saw and knew, forget many things. But—not that. Not while vision remains to me can I forget."

"Yonder stands her cabin, Madame, of gray stones, with the great beams, and a roofed fireplace built outside, as well as one built within. For Marcelite and Philippe, her husband, came first to Mackinac 'most sixty year gone, in the Black Frost year. Then there were many poor here; the half-breeds; also many who had forgot how to work, and had not find h'out how to live without; also those *mal-heureux* in good faith, sick, or lame, or new-comers to this country, and slow to learn. One thing they not be slow to learn—that is, the road to Marcelite's door. Come snow, come shine, that path, she be tramped so clean, no foot kin miss it! And Marcelite help them, every one. 'We cannot buy clothes for all these poor people, Philippe,' she say, with her bright eyes shine, and her black head high like a queen. 'But we can so build our hearth that they can always be made welcome and warm.' That's Marcelite, Madame. Now you understand."

"They had no money, no more than the rest of us. But they both work hard, day in, day h'out; and all they

touch prosper. Philippe, he carry de mail, he fish, he be carpenter; Marcelite, she make garden, she cook, she keep her house so clean and beautiful, it's like a picture to step inside. And no matter how hard they work, how tired they be, always they have time and strength for others. If any is lose' his boat, is run short of flour—there's where you find Philippe. If any is suffering, is bereaved—there's Marcelite. So."

"And they're just the happiest people on this island. The year when I am fifteen, I lie sick; an' all day long I listen for Philippe's whistle, for Marcelite's call. When they come it's like the room is all lit up and warm; I laugh, I talk, I forget all my broke body, my legs that will not go."

"But that year after, then came the fever. It stopped before each door. Not one household did escape. Philippe and Marcelite had three children; so cunning. Lucien, his mother's own, with the grave lips, the eyes that smiled; P'tit Philippe, who was as his father, like as the little branch to the great tree; and the little Marie, who had her share of both. And like a great fire-flame, the fever swept that house. And there was left to them not one of all their brood."

"For ten years, then, they lived on with us. Always kind, gentle, they were, Madame. But Philippe, he not whistle no more. An' Marcelite, she hoe her garden, she cook, she keep her house all white and sweet, like a shrine. But she hold her head always turned aside, like she's listening; and her eyes grow wide and dull, and their sight is dimmed, for that she's trying always to see, something away, away."

"Maybe it's nine, maybe ten years after the fever. Me, I forget. But one night of April I come home very late, past Philippe's cabin. There's a

light in the window; and close by the door stands Philippe himself, and white as the moonlight; but his face is terrible with joy."

"Give you greeting, Octave, *mon fils*," he cry. "Enter, and pay us your *devoirs* as guest. Enter, I insist. For thus you shall be the first of all to give salutations to — Monsieur, my son!"

"Philippe, it was like his happiness had turned his brain. He was mad, wild. He not let that baby out of his sight. He carry it about, he talk to it, he laugh and cry and shout. Marcelite, she don't say so ver' much. And when Philippe is so glad, so insolent in his joy, she look at him, and in her eyes there is dread."

"But after awhile her shoulders lift up straight again, she walk once again like the queen, who cannot fear. And she don't lean her head no more, like she's listening. For sure, Madame, she not need to listen, no longer. Now she kin hear."

"Prosper, they name that baby. And Prosper is the name *juste*, for sure! He grow so fast, you can't believe! Before the frost he walk an' talk; when the year rounds he run everywhere, he's *bon camarade* to every soul on these Island. He was straight and strong and dark, like Philippe, with the black hair curl' tight, and the eyes like black stars; but the laugh in those eyes is Marcelite's own; and just baby that he is, he carry his head high, like he's boss of these Island' by right."

"And that is prett' near what he is, for sure, Madame. He's so strong, so handsome, so brave, we all give him de whip-handle, same's Philippe and Marcelite themselves. He carry things with de high hand. He be always in de mischief; he demands always his own way. However, that way of his is the good way. *Toujours*. It appears he is not alone the child of Marcelite